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Published in:
About Performance

DOI:
[10.3316/INFORMIT.323703367704171](https://doi.org/10.3316/INFORMIT.323703367704171)

Publication date:
2017

Citation for published version (APA):

Filmer, A. (2017). Watching, waiting, listening: Audio Obscura and the perceptual ecology of non-place. *About Performance*, 2017(14/15), 19-40. <https://doi.org/10.3316/INFORMIT.323703367704171>

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Watching, waiting, listening: *Audio Obscura* and the perceptual ecology of non-place

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Introduction

This essay, an experiment in critical writing, traces the modulation between work, world and self that is set in play by Lavinia Greenlaw's sound work *Audio Obscura* (2011), commissioned by Artangel and the Manchester International Festival for Manchester Piccadilly and St. Pancras International stations. [1] Known for her work as a poet and novelist, Greenlaw has written that *Audio Obscura* is "an exploration of the point at which we start to make sense of things; an attempt to arrest and investigate that moment, to separate its components and test their effects" (Greenlaw & Abrams 2011, 7). This reflects her long-standing interest in sense-making and "the mechanics of perception" (Greenlaw in Kendall 1997) which has been expressed in her early collections of poetry and in her collaboration with photographer Garry Fabian Miller. [2] In *Audio Obscura*, the participant, donning headphones and listening to a pre-recorded soundtrack whilst standing in a railway station, is positioned at a threshold between interior and exterior, between seeing and hearing and between sensory perception and meaning making. This positioning is a common feature of much site-specific theatre and performance practice which, through the evocation of multiple frames, places the spectator in a liminal state, destabilizing perception and self (Fischer-Lichte 2008, 95). This dislocated and deterritorialized position, in which neither the work, nor the world, nor the self are as certain as they once were, thematizes the relationship of the spectator to the environment around them, making the renegotiation of one's relationship to the world a particular focus of this sort of work (See Turner 2004).

In this essay I explore how one might write this positioning of the spectator, accounting for the aesthetic logic of the work at hand and the locational labour of the spectator. What sort of critical writing might best account for the relations and exchanges that a site-specific work sets in train? How might we thereby (re)locate the spectator in site-specific theatre and performance? The writing would seem to be necessarily subjective, alert to corporeality and affect, shifting constantly between the topoi of work, world and self, and attending to the generative and disclosive dimensions of the work in question. In what follows I seek to avoid the taxonomic desire that underpins much scholarship on site-specific theatre and performance, leading to the proliferation of critical categories. [3] Rather than categorise what kind of site-specific work *Audio Obscura* is, I seek to open up a space for "thinking about and imagining what might be going on" (Stewart 2011, 1) in this particular work. *Audio Obscura* offers a useful case study because of its reliance on

sound and listening, its exploration of the boundaries between poetry and performance and the open space of interpretation offered to the listener. The attendants who managed the distribution and collection of the headsets in Manchester and St Pancras simply requested that participants not leave the station. There were no explicit instructions for physical action (such as those provided in sound works by Radio Ligna) nor was there any set itinerary (as in other London-based audio works like Graeme Miller's *Linked* or Platform's *And While London Burns*). In *Audio Obscura* an accented woman's voice functioned like an implicit guide, but unlike the voice of Janet Cardiff, there was no sense of wanting to align myself with this woman in any way; the ultimate experience was not, as Justine Shih Pearson writes of Cardiff's New York work *Her Long Black Hair*, "about being close to the narrator, merging with the persona of Janet" (Pearson 2009).

What follows draws on the work of Mieke Bal (2001), Jane Rendell (2010), Nicholas Whybrow (2011) and Kathleen Stewart (2007; 2011). Bal encourages a critical methodology that aims to "put the art first" (2001, xii), while Rendell seeks 'to put the sites of engagement with art first' (2010, 1). Following Whybrow, I acknowledge the embodied and relational nature of my encounter with the work in question, and engage in a form of writing that operates as an "analogous extension" of that encounter (2011, 36). In *Art and the City* (2011) Whybrow seeks to "navigate or manoeuvre inside or around the structures offered" by the works he encounters, foregrounding "affective experience" and using "personal encounter" as a point of departure (43). In writing my experience of *Audio Obscura* I have drawn inspiration from the work of anthropologist Kathleen Stewart who has sought to develop an analytic attention to "atmospheric attunements", an attention "to the matterings, the complex emergent worlds, happenings in everyday life" (2011, 1). In doing this Stewart proposes "a kind of haptic description in which the analyst discovers her object of analysis by writing out its inhabited elements in a space and time" and undertake a writing that eschews "the closure or clarity of a book's interiority or riding a great rush of signs to a satisfying end", but instead operates "as a point of impact, curiosity, and encounter" (2007, 5).

Mobile Listening

I put the headphones on.

The pressing bustle of the station undercroft dissipates to a low hum. It's impressive. I can't help but partially ease the headphones off my ears again to gauge the extent of their noise-cancelling function. And when I do, the thick all-encompassing drone of voices and footfalls in this large reverberant space rushes at me again, pressing and urgent. I ease the headphones back over my ears and the noise retreats.

Enclosed in an intimate sonic envelope I stand, immobilised for the time being, adjusting my headphones in the midst of a flowing crowd of people streaming past me in one's and two's; many trailing compact cases on wheels; some laden with backpacks, handbags, coats; some deep in conversation with absent others, their phones pressed to their ears; others walking blankly, their gaze sliding over glassed-in shop displays. This is St. Pancras International Station on a weekday afternoon in September.



Figure 1: 'The Arcade', St Pancras International. Photo by author.

To stand in a railway station wearing headphones is not unusual, even ones as large and prominent as those that encase my ears. Personal stereos are a common sight and a pervasive urban practice; they are “part of the equipment of mobile nomadism” (Chambers 1994, 51). I’ve often listened to music or to spoken-word podcasts as I’ve travelled: walking to work, on public transport, running in the early mornings or late afternoons. Such mobile listening, whilst it can be perceived as an anti-social gesture or an attempt to remove myself from the world, is also a means by which I can intensify the transaction between my body and the world. On long-distance coach, rail or air journeys the choice of particular sound tracks enhances my appreciation of solitude, of distance or speed. When out running the rhythm of a track played at random from a preselected playlist can suddenly sensitise me to subtle changes in surface and gradient, to the cadence of my feet, to the suck and push of my breath, to the degree of exertion, transforming potentially long sweaty hill climbs into playfully light dances along the single unbroken white line that marks the edge of the bitumen.

Michael Bull, ethnographer of the personal stereo, suggests that the use of such mobile listening technology grants users a greater sense of control over the contingency of the external world and a degree of self-management through the exercise of choice over what to listen to (2000; 2005). Mobile stereo users can generate their own “intimate, manageable and aestheticised spaces” (2005, 347), choosing to shut out or to admit the sounds of the environment around them and using them to manage time and experience and “construct sites of narrative order in precisely those parts and places of the day that threaten experiential fragmentation” (2000, 130). Countering the excessive auditory conditions experienced in urban environments, Brandon LaBelle suggests that, “Personal audio technologies provide a performative shelter for the senses by both filtering out the undifferentiating flood of sound as well as empowering individual agency in controlling what comes in” (2010, 97).

Inside and Out

Wearing the headphones now. Sheltered.

The suppression of the sonic environment of the station afforded by the headphones is only a momentary prelude to the work, but here I purposefully extend it, slowing and amplifying it so as to attend to the specificities of the situation that is emerging. Stewart suggests that, “In a situation, things hanging in the air are worth describing” (2011, 3), and here the headphones have arrested my movement in a space smoothed for ease of transit and consumption. My attention to the sonic, prompted by its partial suppression, and my waiting for what might be heard next, renders the usual operation of perception present through interrupting its habitual synaesthetic functioning (See Merleau-Ponty 2002, 266). My routine bodily engagement with this space is unsettled; ear, eye and foot are now paused and knotted in uncertainty. [4]

The title of the work, *Audio Obscura*, evokes this kind of intersensoriality, combining the act of listening – a “dark listening” as Greenlaw translates the title (Greenlaw and Abrams 2011, 7) – and the act of looking through its play on the name of the camera obscura. This device, a darkened chamber or box in which, through the admission of light through a hole, an image of the exterior might be admitted, is, according to Jonathan Crary, a paradigmatic object, historically defining the relationship of the individual as observer “to the undemarcated, undifferentiated expanse of the world outside” (1990, 34). It is also, argues Crary, “inseparable from a certain metaphysic of interiority,” serving in the work of Isaac Newton and John Locke, amongst others, as “a model simultaneously for the observation of empirical phenomena and for reflective introspection and self-observation” (40). Crary has documented the

demise of the camera obscura as a paradigm for visual perception in the early 19th century through the emergence of greater understanding of the physiological and subjective dimensions of perception. The result is that vision, and the other senses, were effectively re-located “in the subjectivity of the observer” (1990, 150). But here, standing, watching, waiting and listening, the architectural form of the camera obscura as a ‘dark room’ pierced by light, and its function as a space enabling observation and self-reflection, are both revealing of where I now find myself.

I am waiting for the work to begin, but already positioned at a threshold, situated inside and outside, fully visible, in public, and yet already removed to a quiet space of listening and contemplation. I am already attending to the possible relations between what I am seeing and what I am hearing, and to the sense I am making. I can, it seems, hear myself think as my thinking is sheltered and provided a space in this station through the relative quiet offered by the headphones. [5]

In his essay ‘Seen from the Window’, Henri Lefebvre writes from an analogous position, describing what he hears and sees from his window, overlooking a junction in Paris. “Noise. Noises. Murmurs,” he begins (2004, 27). Such noise is, “chaotic, has no rhythm” (27), but with attentiveness, he suggests that it is possible to begin to distinguish both the sources and the interactions of sounds and noises. However, “in order to grasp and analyse rhythms, it is necessary to get outside them, but not completely: be it through illness or a technique. A certain exteriority enables the analytic intellect to function” (27). In *Audio Obscura* the noise-cancelling headphones, as technique, have this effect. “However,” as Lefebvre continues, “to grasp a rhythm it is necessary to have been *grasped* by it; one must *let oneself go*, give oneself over, abandon oneself to its duration” (27, original emphasis). As a means of doing this Lefebvre suggests taking up a position on a balcony, which allows him to situate himself “simultaneously inside and outside”, as he does in the essay. Whybrow refers to Lefebvre’s positioning of himself in the context of his own discussion of the need to synthesise lived experience and reflective encounter; “the balcony on to the street appears to him to be made for ensuring adequate reflective possibilities” (2011, 39). What is striking in Lefebvre’s description is the latently theatrical position his balcony affords, a position analogous with mine in St Pancras. Like Lefebvre I am still part of the urban environment I am distanced from; and my headphones, like Lefebvre’s balcony, allow me to begin to grasp the rhythms of the environment around me through framing it, providing a “mentally prolonged” space (Lefebvre 2004, 33). [6]

The Voice in My Ear

These thoughts on Lefebvre don't occur to me in St. Pancras, only later. There is space to think, but there is also more to attend to. An accented female voice, suddenly close in my ears, instructs me to,

"Listen."

And then, almost immediately, she adds,

"The heart of it."

The word 'listen' is spoken as an imperative, that much is clear, but the fragment that follows – "The heart of it" – floats, untethered from the instruction. The use of the pronoun, its referent unknown, is ambiguous but suggests promise. The heart of what? Is this voice to be my guide in this listening, akin to Janet Cardiff's close presence in her audio works? But the voice has already fallen silent, replaced by the rising noise of the station concourse, recorded and now replayed through the headphones, along with the growing, pressing presence of other distinct voices, talking, whispering, murmuring, hissing, all on the cusp of intelligibility. I register these in distraction as snatches of speech spoken before the voices fade. The sound trails off. It recedes into a long, low tone.

Following and Falling

Still standing, listening.

Station sounds return once more.

A man's voice now, a tone of admission, he,

"Stinks of it."

His despairing speech continues, and in a pause I hear the same accented female voice from before, her voice commanding an authority and a directness of address that the other voices lack:

"There is always someone falling. Do not be afraid to fall."

In St. Pancras, these words, heard and registered, jolt me. This isn't the first time I've experienced this piece, and when I first listened to *Audio Obscura* a few months ago in Manchester Piccadilly Station, I heard these words differently. [7] Then it was not 'falling', but 'following', and not 'fall', but 'follow'. And then, seeking some kind of guidance as to what I was to do with what I was hearing, some way out of the knotted uncertainty, I took the statement as a more or less explicit instruction to follow someone. So I set off, tailing a man whose coat billowed behind him as he strode towards an exit, falling into step with his hurried gait, seeking to locate in him the male voice I was hearing. [8]

Now, doing the piece again, I'm struck that my hearing of the woman's statement – one which had remained quite clear in my memory of the piece and which I had written down in notes I took at the time – was patently mistaken. [9] Her instruction was that I should not be afraid of falling. This throws me into doubt about what I am hearing, a doubt which is intrinsic to hearing itself; Salomé Voegelin reminds me that, "hearing is full of doubt: phenomenological doubt of the listener about the heard and himself hearing it" (2010, xii). Unlike sight, which enables the seer to assume a meta-position in relation to the seen, the listener cannot be but simultaneous with the heard (xii). And the very headphones I wear in *Audio Obscura*, in sheltering me from the pressing crowd, reveal themselves as a means through which I am subjected to speech and doubt. The voices in *Audio Obscura* are multiple, fragmented and fleeting; they pause; they repeat themselves; they lack context; they erupt suddenly and then vanish, some returning, possibly, later. The patterning and fragmentation of speech is constructed, reflecting Samuel Beckett's later prose in the coupling of a seemingly unceasing vocality with a rigorous subtractive logic. Greenlaw explained her creative process in an interview with Cornelia Parker and in a piece she wrote in *The Guardian* newspaper, stating that she initially wrote a series of twelve monologues based on her observations of people waiting in stations, which she then "smashed to bits", arranging the shards with the assistance of sound designer Tim Barker and composer Harry Escott (See Greenlaw 2011b). In further editing, conducted aurally, she sought to take away as many of the remaining words as she could, removing much of their original context (Greenlaw 2011a).

Even without an awareness of this compositional process, it is clear that the task of reconstructing the fragments of speech into some coherent order is impossible. Too much has been subtracted, and in listening, details slip past and phrases, their significance uncertain, are quickly lost or forgotten. The voices constitute an aural acousmatic montage in which the gaps, what remains unspoken and unsaid, are potentially more valuable than what is said. These gaps, what Wolfgang Iser has termed 'blanks' in the context of literary texts, hinder the coherence of the spoken text, and act as a spur to my imaginative engagement (See Iser 1978). Having failed to locate the voices I hear in the bodies I see around me I now can't help but try to identify particular voices as individuals and to try and make sense of their situations, even as I recognise the futility of this.

The voices are identifiable in certain respects; I register different ages, classes, accents and genders as well as emotional states. There are also clearly identifiable motifs at play: loss, broken relationships, indecision, suspicion, criminality, solitude, death, intimacy. But the excess of possible interpretations begins to wash over me, coupled with the overriding 'blank' between the speech I'm hearing and the passing faces and bodies I see around me.

The gap between 'following' and 'falling' is significant; I've tried to follow the work, to interpret it, but now I need to fall, to acknowledge and give myself over to the crisis of meaning it provokes. And this entails a loosening of my grip and a shift in position akin to that described by Doreen Massey when she argues for a spatial imagination that entails a shift "from an imagination of a textuality *at which one looks*, towards recognising one's place *within* continuous and multiple processes of emergence" (2005, 54, original emphasis). The work is asking me to dwell with and through it, treating it not as an object to be interpreted, but as a means of orientation. I need to attend to how it orients me to the space around me and to what this might disclose.

The accented woman's voice returns, as if in assurance:

"There is always something left behind. Something slips, or is lost, or forgotten. And it's alright."

Eavesdropping

Walking now, listening.

Walking along the undercroft.

I'm not walking because I have been instructed to. In *Audio Obscura* I receive no explicit instructions for what to do, and no itinerary or map. But the work moves, the fragmented texture of speech producing its own rhythm of time and space, to which I respond with my own physical movement. My walk becomes, I realise later, a form of marking time, a regular slow-paced swinging of one foot after another punctuated by pauses, when I rest up between or against the wrought iron columns that form a strong rhythmic line down both sides of the space.

If this work prompts doubt and uncertainty about the act of listening and what I'm hearing, then in the grain of the voices, in the nature of the listening required, and in the suggestiveness of the statements of the accented woman's voice, it also promises the revelation of a secret. Martin Iddon suggests that the figure of the eavesdropper is key to at least part of what is involved in listening, and, "To be listening is to come to know a secret" (2010, 7). The voices are close in my ears, spoken softly even when the speaker become agitated, and the grain, the "materiality of the body" (1977, 182) is audible. The voices I hear remain close to throats, the breath soft across lips and tongue; they aren't pushed from the body with a desire to be heard. Akin to murmurs, whispers and quiet asides, these are inner voices made audible, situated within the recorded and reproduced environmental noise of the station. This positions me as an eavesdropper, as an inadvertent over-hearer of private voices.

The accented woman's voice is different. She enunciates with another in mind, tacitly acknowledging a listening presence. Her voice is positioned close to the ears and above the other voices when she speaks. She speaks as an observer, a position analogous to mine, and her observations guide me implicitly. At one point her words seem to intervene in a man's speech:

"Poor man, Poor man."

At another point she confides:

"I want you to know that someone has seen."

Most clearly she intimates at the possibility of the revelation of that which is located at 'the heart of it':

"It is here."

As a form of implicit and subtle guide her speech punctuates and provides a loose structure to the fragments, intimating that I cannot help trying to discern order and construct meaning from the excess of voices.

In evoking eavesdropping as constituting part of what it is that a listener engages in when listening, Martin Iddon draws on Jean Luc-Nancy's etymological investigation of 'listening' and 'hearing' (in French, *écouter* and *entendre*, respectively). It is Nancy who notes the use of *écoute* to denote both a person who listens ("who spies"), and a concealed place of listening; hence, the link between listening and the yielding of a secret (Nancy 2007, 4-

5). In the pairing of *écoute* and *entendre*, however, he notes the link between “perceived sense” and “perceived meaning”, a link equally valid in English as it is in French. But Nancy questions the subsuming of sense in meaning, of the “hearing sound” in the “hearing say”, exploring instead the possibility of resonance; perhaps sense should not just make sense, but resound (6). In listening to *Audio Obscura* the ‘hearing say’ gradually falls into the ‘hearing sound’. To be listening is to be straining towards a possible but not immediately accessible, meaning (6). Listening is “on the edge of meaning, or in an edgy meaning of extremity, and as if the sound were precisely nothing else than this edge, this fringe, this margin” (Nancy 2007, 7). Iddon suggests, ultimately that “the secret to be understood in hearing, then, is, or might be, nothing to do with a linguistic message as such, but rather, a bodily one.” It is the body that might be “the resonant chamber in which the secret is unveiled” (2010, 7). Nancy suggests that “meaning and sound share the space of a referral” a space that he identifies in general terms as being “the space of a *self*, a subject” (2007, 8, original emphasis).

An Auditory Geographic Imaginary

As an *écoute* then, listening to inner voices that are hearing themselves speak, seeking to presence themselves to themselves in an interstitial space of transit.

The accented woman’s voice again:

“The ground falls away and you are standing in a different place.”

I experience a deepening sense of dissociation. Before, my desire to place the voices in bodies was strong. Now the gravity and rhythms of the underscore have lulled me and I am simply subject to the accumulated emotional tenor of speech. The voices are solitary; they betray tension. Each is profoundly alone. Even when they speak of others, when they speak of intimacy and contentment, they speak to themselves of others who are, at the time of speaking, absent. A male voice evokes solitude through contemplating the lack of anyone to eulogise his life in his absence:

There’s no one. No one to say he was always whatever and we loved how he did this and that and there was this time when we all and I will never forget how he and we never thought not for a minute that he’d be gone so soon and how we miss him we miss him so much and nothing will ever be the same without him and we will never stop loving and remembering and let us gather and let us pray. (Greenlaw & Abrams 2011, 48) [10]

In the silence that follows this utterance I watch the flows around me. An escalator maintains a steady delivery of bodies from the upper floor. A glass-walled lift rises and falls. I catch the eye of a man waiting for his friend to use an automatic teller machine and look away. A repeated paging cuts through the shelter of the headphones; three long tones and a computerized announcement asking for a staff member to return to the control room. The polished surface underfoot reminds me of Tim Ingold's observation that Western societies are ungrounded, that the urban surfaces and environments we construct for ourselves are designed to leave no trace of our passage. "People, as they walk the streets, leave no trace of their movements, no record of their having passed by. It is as if they had never been" (2004, 329). The lack of impress represents a form of detachment that can be read in the surfaces of the contemporary city. "It appears that people, in their daily lives, merely skim the surface of a world that has been previously mapped out and constructed for them to occupy, rather than contributing through their movements to its ongoing formation" (2004, 329).



Figure 2: *Audio Obscura*, Lavinia Greenlaw, 2011. An Artangel commission. Photo by Julian Abrams.

Through *Audio Obscura* the rhythm of the flows and the architectonic qualities of the station begin to speak, albeit in ways that elude enunciation. In Laura Levin's terms, the station is able to communicate "*in a material language particular to itself*," through the clearing effected by the work (Levin 2009, 241, original emphasis). The presencing of intersensoriality evoked by the

technology of the noise cancelling headphones and mp3 player and their ability to subject me to Greenlaw's text voiced by actors, enable an encounter with a different place, an encounter that is usually hidden by my habitual bodily routine in such a space. The work uses the "tendentially methexic" nature of sound and the sonorous to reframe the "tendentially mimetic" nature of sight and vision, which forces me to form dynamic and shifting constellations of meaning within the dynamic of this place taking place, constantly relating one to the other in a way which cannot be resolved, even when the work concludes (Nancy 2007, 10).

Steven Connor argues that the capacity of auditory experience "to disintegrate and reconfigure space" (Connor 1997, 206) is one of the most important features of auditory experience. The result of the influence of sound and sonic sensibility is that "the singular space of the visual is transformed by the experience of sound to a plural space" (1997, 207). This auditory experience has implications for conceptions of the self and for a broader geographic imaginary. The self "is a self imagined not as a point, but as a membrane" (1997, 207), and space too is re-imagined as what Connor terms "switchboard space" (1997, 211). This is the way in which communication technologies – Connor uses the development of telephony – place the user within a larger virtual networked space that can't be grasped visually but is imagined aurally. Brandon Labelle has extended the reach of Connor's term, arguing that the switchboard spatial experience has now been allocated "to the entire field of everyday life", placing us always "among the weave of the actual and the virtual" (2010, xx).

Rising and Falling

The voices are woven more tightly together now; interspersed, one with another. A woman's speech almost constitutes a narrative thread. She is working something out. She recounts a list of words found in the browser search history of her husband's computer. She gets to 'underlay'. But it isn't. It's 'underage'. But she isn't absolutely sure of what she's seen, what the implications are, how she should act. What I grasp is the repeated pairs of words that punctuate her speech:

"Ridiculous! Ridiculous!"

And shortly after:

"Think. Think."

And then:

"Sick! Sick!"

If, as Stewart observes, "The senses sharpen on the surfaces of things taking form" (2011, 4), then through its duration, *Audio Obscura* asks me to attend to something constantly taking form here in the station but never finished. The station is thick with murmuring, issuing from a mental life marked by doubt and stalked by tension. The station offers the promise of travel, but no guidance as to which line to take. *Audio Obscura* tunes me into this atmosphere, the social static of the concourse, the space between the platforms. Stewart suggests that this is a form of dwelling in and of itself: "What affects us – the sentience of a situation – is also a dwelling, a worlding born from an atmospheric attunement" (2011, 5).

A man's voice:

"I'm on my way but I'm just not sure."

I hear sobbing somewhere.

The accented woman's voice once more:

"It falls away. The room is empty."

The recorded environmental noise fades, replaced by a tonal underscore. I feel released and weightless as the work reverberates along a vertical axis. The recorded environmental noise blends with and reinforces my haptic sensing of this place in movement with the pulse of heavy engines, the vibration from the tube lines below and the footfalls of fellow pedestrians, and even the differential expansion and contraction of the steel, concrete and brick of the station as they heat and cool through the day. When it is withdrawn, replaced with a long tonal underscore, the speech that follows floats, suspended in mid air.

A young woman's voice:

"Other people don't see how precarious everything is."

A child's voice, high-pitched, distant:

“Isn’t it high?”



Figure 3: ‘Barlow’s train shed’, St Pancras International. Photo by author.

The Lofty Heights of Barlow’s Train Shed

Looking up from where I stand, I see the great steel and glass canopy of William Henry Barlow’s 1868 train shed arcing above me. A marvel of engineering, at the time of its construction it formed the largest enclosed space anywhere in the world, an emblem of the railroad’s participation during the nineteenth century in the industrialization of space and time and the emergence of a globalized system of commodity circulation (See Schivelbusch 1987). This history can be read in the proportions and articulation of the architecture around me. That I can see the ceiling from where I stand is due to an extensive redevelopment to the station, undertaken between 2001 and 2007, which saw St Pancras re-branded as ‘St Pancras International’, the London terminus for high-speed Eurostar trains to Europe. As part of this redevelopment great light wells were sunk into the undercroft, along with escalators, stairs and lifts, forming a new circulation space lined with the original wrought iron columns and a string of glass-fronted shops. Termed ‘The Arcade’ the architect Alastair Lansley has described this new space as providing ‘clarity’ for those who encounter it through its provision of natural light and a visual panorama; “Passengers strolling through the retail arcade can gaze with wonder at the lofty heights of Barlow’s train shed

soaring above” (2009, 103). Discursively, and in its built fabric, the redevelopment neatly ties together the railway’s historic role in the commodification of place (Schivelbusch 1987) with St Pancras’ contemporary use as a site for the consumption of historic engineering, travel and a range of upmarket goods.

The wrought iron columns provide a stopping place for listening in the flow of the concourse and I position myself in the gaps between them, or lean up against them, to pause in my slow walk. Their very spacing, I later read, was determined by the undercroft’s designation as a storage facility for beer barrels. Frederick Williams’ nineteenth century account explains this, and the implications for the design of the station as a whole. Given that the station needed to be raised above the level of Euston Road so as to cross Regent’s Canal, an undercroft was constructed, and:

[...] as the area was to be devoted to the accommodation of Burton beer traffic, the distances between the supports were arranged at such intervals as to allow of the largest number of barrels of beer being placed between them. These distances were found to be twenty-nine feet four inches. As the great outlines of the superstructure had necessarily to be adjusted to the position of the supports below, the unit of the entire fabric came to be founded on the length of a *barrel of beer*. (Williams 1888, 250-1, original emphasis)

Where solitudes coexist

Standing.

Leaning.

My shoulder is pushed up against the cool of a column, its wrought iron disguised by a thick coat of white paint.

The passing crowd are a nameless wash as words and phrases, heard and remembered, now resound. I am sensing how “*precarious*” it all is, how it “*cracks*”, it “*peels*”, “*evaporates*” and “*falls away*.”

A rhythmic patterning in *Audio Obscura* creates points of intensification and clarification. There’s a movement repeated three or maybe four times in which the multiplicity of the recorded environmental noise and the more fragmentary speech fades, replaced by a sustained tonal underscore and the emergence of a single speaking voice. The voice that emerges is different every time, but

each evokes in me a tension, contracting the world of the station to a single quavering line and a straining to define something never quite definable.

A young woman's voice:

"Something unformed. Desperate. Trying to get a hold."

A pause.

The recorded environmental noise rises once more.

If the beer barrel is the unit on which the entire fabric of St Pancras International is founded, then other measurable units govern its operation and monitor its function. Owned by Canadian pension funds St Pancras International's performance as a transport hub and investment asset is measured in such terms as the annual number of passengers that use its thirteen platforms, and the annual return from its ninety thousand square feet of retail space. The St Pancras Clock, hanging high in the train shed, indicates the regulation of time and the daily schedule of arrivals and departures. The signage indicates the routes to coaches, parking, and luggage services, to tickets, toilets and taxis. Despite its historic aura, St Pancras International feels like an airport terminal; it is legible boldly and visually, its surfaces, design and signage promising easy passage. It is, in Marc Augé's terms, a non-place, "there to be passed through," "measured in units of time", and "lived in the present" (Augé 1995, 104). Non-places, as Augé has argued, are the quintessential spaces of supermodernity, "spaces of circulation, communication and consumption, where solitudes coexist" (Augé 1996, 177). Characterized by the intensification and acceleration of modernity and a tripartite excess of time, space and individuality, non-places include motorways, airports and supermarkets. While Augé situates non-place in conflict with what he calls 'anthropological place', arguing that the latter, unlike non-place, is "relational, historical and concerned with identity" (1995, 78), he also suggests that neither occur in pure form; rather, place and non-place exist in a dialectic, "the first is never completely erased, the second never totally completed" (1995, 79).

Augé's elaboration of non-place is not without its ambiguities, as Peter Merriman and Emer O'Beirne have noted. Merriman observes that Augé's statements that non-places "are empirically measurable and analysable" sit at apparent odds with the importance he also seems to place on individuals' experiences of such spaces (Augé in Merriman 2009, 21). Surveying the numerous essays and articles in which Augé has explained and elaborated non-place, Emer O'Beirne notes a distinct shift from his earlier unambiguous assertion of the objectively identifiable nature of non-place to an increasing

acknowledgement of the undeniably subjective dimensions of such spaces (O'Beirne 2006). As with Merriman, O'Beirne argues that an understanding of the concept of 'non-place' needs to take into account Augé's own auto-ethnographic and self-analytical methodology, which, as she suggests, points to the experience and attitude of the individual observer or user as key in determining whether a designated space might be considered a 'non-place' (2006, 45). Merriman, however, also observes that the travellers, shoppers and others who encounter non-places frequently do so in similar ways, "in a somewhat detached, distracted or automatic manner that reflects a habitual embodied dwelling-with-thing in the world" (Merriman 2009, 28). But, he warns, "this distracted attention and lack of reflection cannot easily be equated with solitariness, boredom or isolation" (2009, 29).

Imagined and inhabited

My thoughts are wandering now, and the clarity with which I grasped the rhythms, flows and architectonic qualities of St Pancras is gone. I still listen to speech, a man's insistently whispered voice in a tone of agonised prayer, it seems. But I'm registering only the affective tenor of this singular voice, the way the voice betrays the sense of a subject holding itself so tightly, bound up in an agonising desire to escape.

I'm drifting, lingering in non-place.

Zygmunt Bauman argues that in non-place everything is done to make the co-existence of strangers "merely physical," to normalize behaviour and thereby "to cancel, level up or make null and void the idiosyncratic subjectivities" of those who, for a time, find themselves in proximity to one another (Bauman 2000, 102). But in what sense might this concept of non-place relate to, encompass, or explain my experience of *Audio Obscura*? Only in a superficial sense might I now describe St Pancras as a present of frictionless transit; rather, through watching, waiting and listening, it feels like a space of intense, if largely hidden, negotiation, encompassing not only the performative conventions of what Georg Simmel calls "external reserve" (Simmel 1971, 15) or what Erving Goffman calls "civil inattention" (See Goffman 1963; Pütz 2012), but also a complex of essentially imaginative mental acts involving reflection, remembrance, identification and projection in which the affective texture of the social is felt. J. Lowell Lewis, drawing on Henri Courbin, has observed that "ordinary life is always and everywhere permeated with acts of imagination," such that "we 'fill-out' aspects of places or people which we cannot directly perceive through a process of active imagination" (2006, 282). These imaginal qualities, together with the wider experiential dimensions of being in non-places – of waiting, of being delayed, of missing one's connection, of being met, of being missed, of being uncertain, tense, excited – are flattened out in Augé's conceptualization, partly because of his semi-autobiographical method and partly because they cannot be accounted for in

the horizontal dialectic he established between 'place' and 'non-place', based as it is on the textual metaphor of the palimpsest.

In one key passage, in *Non-Places: Introduction to an Anthropology of Supermodernity* (1995), Augé suggests something of the wider imaginal and imaginative qualities of non-places. In the opening chapter he describes the fictional French businessman Pierre Dupont's drive from Paris to Roissy along the motorway, withdrawing money from an automatic teller machine, paying the motorway toll with a card, depositing his luggage, receiving his boarding pass and then slipping through Passport Control. Augé underlines that once Dupont was "sorted out", having been processed and allowed to pass, "he had nothing to do but wait for the sequence of events" that was to follow (Augé 1995, 2-3). He then channels Dupont's thoughts (and, presumably, his own) as he waits to board his aircraft, reflecting that,

[...] these days, surely, it was in these crowded places where thousands of individual itineraries converged for a moment, unaware of one another, that there survived something of the uncertain charm of the waste lands, the yards and building sites, the station platforms and waiting rooms where travellers break step, of all the chance meeting places where fugitive feelings occur of the possibility of continuing adventure, the feeling that all there is to do is to 'see what happens.' (1995, 3)

In *Audio Obscura*, sheltered by noise-cancelling headphones and subjected to speech, this convergence of 'thousands of individual itineraries' is intensified, and I feel it, drawn as I am into an imaginative engagement with the contingency and precarity of lives in motion. This is the potential of 'non-places' in their diversity, rather than 'non-place' as a category; their seeming emptiness allows them to function as spaces rich in imaginative possibility. It is also the potential of site-specific theatre and performances, to ask us to (re)locate and (re)orient ourselves through our encounters with specific works. And it is the particularities of these encounters – guided by dramaturgical logics but also profoundly subjective – that critical accounts should seek to render.

Turning for home

The sound of footsteps. Single words spoken. A list.

An elderly man's voice:

I'm here less and less.

Things are falling. He says:

I'm almost gone.

He says:

It falls away and what remains isn't you at all, its your life at its brightest.

The accented woman's voice one last time:

Turning for home, we leave ourselves, we leave alone.

Footsteps. Single words spoken. A list.

Step. Step. Step.

There is a period of silence. I realise the piece has finished.

I wait. Sheltered.

I take the headphones off.

Endnotes

[1] *Audio Obscura* ran from July 2-17, 2011 at Manchester Piccadilly Station as part of Manchester International Festival, and from September 13 to October 23, 2011 at St Pancras International. I encountered the piece in Manchester on July 17, 2011, in St Pancras on September 15, 2011 and again on March 23, 2012, courtesy of Artangel. In approaching Artangel to request a copy of either the audio or the transcript I was informed that Greenlaw had instructed that the piece only be listened to in the environments for which it was created. This was a key factor in listening to the piece again in 2012. Unless stated, any quotations from the work included in this essay are my recollection of what I heard, recorded in my own notes. Further information on *Audio Obscura* can be found on the Artangel website: http://www.artangel.org.uk/projects/2011/audio_obscura.

[2] In her early work, particularly the poems in her first major published collection *Night Photograph* (1993), Greenlaw displayed an interest in science and scientific knowledge coupled with an exploration of the more unquantifiable aspects of human experience. Her poems dwell on changing experiences of the sea, of space and landscape, as well as on travel, memory and dream, and the shifting interplay of light and vision. In her more recent collections, *A World Where News Travelled Slowly* (1997) and *Minsk* (2003) an attention to the mysterious flux of the everyday emerges more fully. In *Thoughts of a Night Sea* (Miller and Greenlaw, 2002) Greenlaw collaborated with Garry Fabian Miller, producing sparse fragments of text to accompany Miller's abstract non-camera based images.

[3] Both Miwon Kwon (2002, 2) and Bertie Ferdman (2013, 5) list the array of terms used by artists and critics to describe and categorize site-specific work.

[4] In discussing the concept of intersensoriality, David Howes has drawn on Michel Serres description of the senses "as interconnected in a knot" (2005, 9).

[5] Greenlaw has spoken of writing as itself "an architectural process" (2011b) in which poems might serve as containers.

[6] The logic described here can be observed in at least two other London-based sound works that involve traversing urban environments on foot. In Janet Cardiff's *The Missing Voice: Case Study B* and Platform's *And While London Burns*, participants are led to urban vantage points (a bus stop, a balcony overlooking the concourse of Liverpool Street Station, the top of The Monument to the Great Fire of London) effecting a shift in their positioning from being immersed in urban life to being more distant and reflective.

[7] I have chosen to write about my experience in St Pancras and not in Manchester Piccadilly. Comparing the two instances I found my experience in the former more resonant; the voices worked in concert with the environment and the architecture of the space, presencing the space more than in Manchester Piccadilly.

[8] Pierre Schaeffer has used the term 'acousmatic' to refer to "sounds one hears without seeing their originating cause" (Schaeffer in Chion 1994, 71). In film, "the intervention of an acousmatic voice, or a voice heard without the physical body visible on screen, often makes the story into a quest to anchor the voice in a body or a character on screen" (Hanssen 2010, 45).

[9] Victoria Yates, writing a review on the website *London Student* also misheard this statement: "The piece not only hints at engagement but actively encourages those within it to associate the audio with the station surroundings, going so far as to instruct you to "follow someone" (an edict I ignored, the internal struggle between authority figures and social acceptability being won by the latter, but which was sorely tempting)" (Yates 2011).

[10] This quotation is from the text of the book *Audio Obscura*, published to coincide with the work's public seasons in Manchester and London. In it snippets of Greenlaw's text from *Audio Obscura* accompany images from Manchester Piccadilly and St Pancras stations taken by Julian Abrams.

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